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ABSTRACT

This microethnographic study examined the perspectives of paraprofessionals assisting students with disabilities in inclusive educational settings. Extensive open-ended individual interviews were conducted with 10 educational technicians from 10 different schools in Maine. Demographic data on paraprofessionals in Maine were also analyzed. The paraprofessionals discussed their needs for training, support, evaluation, and participation in the IEP (Individualized Education Program) process. The participants tended to be most concerned about the following issues: feelings of invisibility and marginalization; the need for fair, helpful evaluations; and specific challenges of inclusion such as lack of training to support students with severe behavioral and physical disabilities. The study resulted in the following recommendations for paraprofessionals: (1) clarify roles and responsibilities, (2) request annual written evaluations, and (3) be visible and valued. (Contains 22 references.) (DB)

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Abstract

This microethnographic study examined the perspectives on inclusion from ten paraprofessionals from 10 different schools in Maine, as well as demographic data on paraprofessionals in Maine. These paraprofessionals participated in extensive open-ended individual interviews, discussing their needs for training, support, evaluation and participation in the IEP process. Based on these findings, implications for practice are shared.

The invisible elves of the inclusive school - paraprofessionals.

Introduction

As the number of students with disabilities in general education classrooms has increased, so has the number of paraprofessionals or teacher assistants working in our schools. Since 1990 the number of paraprofessionals/instructional aides/paraeducators/ teacher assistants in our public schools has doubled (Pickett, 1996), yet little research has been conducted to understand the perceptions of those paraprofessionals working in inclusive classrooms. Some of the literature on paraprofessionals has focused on their changing roles and responsibilities in inclusive classrooms (Doyle, 1995; McLaughlin, 1996), while other studies have focused on the teacher's role in supervising and training paraprofessionals (Pickett & Gerlach, 1997).

Recent literature has examined current challenges facing paraeducators in inclusive classrooms and the need for better and more appropriate training of paraprofessionals (Giangreco, 1997; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997). Yet few researchers have asked the paraprofessionals themselves about their experiences working in inclusive classrooms. This study has attempted to use qualitative methodology to examine the perspectives of ten paraprofessionals working in inclusive classrooms, grades kindergarten through twelfth grade, in the state of Maine.

Background Information

Paraprofessionals working in inclusive schools throughout the country are a diverse group of individuals (Logue, 1992; Lorenz, 1994; National Education Association, 1994; Snodgrass, 1991). They have varied educational levels, ages, experiences, and reasons for seeking employment as a paraprofessional. To illustrate this diversity, the author used

available data from the Maine Department of Education (1994) to help develop a description of this group of paraeducators, who are called educational technicians.

In 1994, the year of this study, there were 4,016 ed techs (educational technicians) employed in public schools in the state of Maine, a mostly rural, sparsely populated state with roughly one million people. Portland, the largest city, has a population of 90,000 inhabitants. At that time the average salary for an ed tech working in an elementary school was $8.70 per hour and for an ed tech working in a secondary school, the wage was $9.85 per hour (Maine Department of Education, 1994).

Maine does not provide certification for ed techs, but it does have a process through the Department of Education, to give "authorization" as an ed tech at various levels for employment by local school districts. The levels and requirements for authorization are:

> Ed Tech I: Reviews and reinforces previously introduced learning under the direct supervision of the classroom teacher or appropriate content specialist. Assists in preparation of classroom materials or student supervision. Instructional duties must be directly supervised by classroom teacher or specialist; non-instructional duties supervised by administration. High school degree/GED required.
>
> Ed Tech II: Duties of Ed Tech I, also may introduce new learning preplanned in collaboration with the classroom teacher or specialist. Supervision similar to ED Tech I but may also conduct small groups with indirect professional supervision. Two year college degree required and/or several years experience with children in an instructional role.
>
> Ed Tech III: Includes duties and working conditions of Ed Techs I and II. May also supervise small groups in community-based programs with indirect, regular professional supervision. College degree required and some instructional experience with children. (Maine Department of Education, 1994).

Therefore, these different levels require different skills for different levels of responsibility and, in turn, have different rates of pay. This system is quite unique to the state of Maine (Policy Study Associates, 1997).

Even within Maine and within ed tech levels, it is difficult to describe the "composite" paraprofessional. The majority of employed ed techs are female, and the educational background of ed techs varies from a high school diploma through a Master's

degree (see Table 1). The ages of individuals employed as ed techs ranges from 18 years to above 60 years with the most common age group being ages 40 - 49 years (see Table 2).

As students with disabilities have moved from segregated, self-contained schools and classrooms, the paraprofessionals who support them have also moved from isolated settings to more mainstreamed, less highly supervised environments (Stainback & Stainback, 1990). Ed techs now work with a variety of students with disabilities supporting their instruction within the general education classroom. Their roles and responsibilities frequently vary depending on the student's etiology (i.e. cerebral palsy, emotional disability, autism, mental retardation, learning disability) and the student's needs (i.e. physical assistance, behavioral support, structure and organization, parallel instruction, modified curriculum, adaptations to lessons and testing), as well as the needs of both the general education teachers for instructional assistance and the needs of the special education teacher for assistance with coverage (Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were ten ed techs who worked in ten different public schools in Maine, kindergarten through twelfth grade, supporting students with disabilities in general education classrooms for the majority of the school day. All the participants were selected from Maine as part of convenience sampling techniques and because similarities of responsibilities would match Maine authorization levels (I,II, or III). .

Purposive sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used in attempts to find ed techs representing geographic and grade level diversity. Initially, twenty participants were sought out to be involved with this study. Contacts were made with classroom teachers, both general and special education, who were enrolled in graduate studies at the University at Maine where the researcher was employed. In turn, some identified ed techs recommended additional ed techs who were employed in various school districts and worked in inclusive classrooms. Another source of participants was a technical college in

the state that offered a two year course-of-study in an apprenticeship program for educational technicians.

After the name of an ed tech was received, a phone interview was conducted by the researcher to explain the purpose of the study and to insure that the ed tech was actually supporting students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Next, interviews were scheduled, demographic information collected, and participant consent forms signed.

Pseudonyms were used for the actual names of teachers, although gender was reflected accurately. Ed techs were selected to be interviewed based on their comfort level with the research and scheduling factors. As Table 3 shows, all ten participants had from between 1 - 7 years of experience with an average of 2.9 years of experience. They worked with a diverse number of students with disabilities ranging from one-to-one support to serving 11 students throughout the school day. Their educational backgrounds varied from a high school degree to a Master's degree in Education. Salaries were reported as ranging from a low of $6.10 per hour to a high of $10.00 per hour.

Data Collection

The goal during the interview process was to get the best and most complete information possible from the ed techs about their experiences working in inclusive classrooms. The objective was to relax the participants and create opportunities for reflective conversations with them about their roles and responsibilities as paraprofessionals. This approach has been suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) as an appropriate methodology for an in-depth study of a small number of cases in order to make analytical generalizations. The participants' perceptions were of the utmost importance. Their thoughts would assist other paraprofessionals, general and special educators, as well as families, administrators, and teacher educators to better understand the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals working in inclusive classrooms.

The interview questions were open-ended and organized and presented in a sequential manner. They interview questions broadly described were:

1) Describe your typical day - time of arrival, breaks, departure, responsibilities, colleagues, school environment, students served, etc.

2) Discuss how you came to be an ed tech - why were you interested in this position and what was the application and selection process like for you?

3) Describe who supervises you in your work and the number of teachers you professionally interact with on a given day.

4) What type of support do you need to be effective in your work?

5) What types of training do you need to be effective in your work?

6) What is your level of involvement with families of students with disabilities - do you participate in parent conferences and other types of communication?

7) Do you participate in the IEP process - in what ways? Would you like to be more involved with the IEP process and families?

8) Have you ever been formally evaluated and what was that process like for you?

9) Do you have a written job description and is it current? Why or why not?

10) Are you hoping to become a certified teacher in the near future? Why or why not?

11) Share other thoughts related to inclusion and your efforts in this school.

Participants were interviewed individually, in audio-taped conversations which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, with the average length being 70 minutes. Interviews were conducted after teaching hours at school sites for six participants, while four participants chose to be interviewed in their own homes. They chose their own homes for convenience, privacy, lack of interruptions, and to create a more relaxed atmosphere for dialogue. Each interview began with assurances of confidentiality and verification of basic

demographic information gathered during the initial phone conversations. Interviews ended when the participants indicated they had nothing else to say.

A copy of the complete transcript was sent to each participant for approval. This was to insure that the transcripts said what the ed techs meant to say and that their voices were transcribed properly with appropriate grammatical structures. They were encouraged to suggest changes or deletions or alternate word choices that would insure confidentiality and increase clarity. Only four participants requested any changes, and these changes were very minimal and related to grammatical corrections.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed and interpreted consistent with grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) utilizing systematic coding and analysis as well as a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Contextual information for this study was gathered during the teacher interviews. Notes were written up immediately after each interview to describe each teacher's emotions, hesitations, interruptions, and facial and body language. Individual interviews were transcribed and numbered 210 pages in total. Each transcript was reviewed thoroughly and coded. Broad themes (need for training, lack of evaluations, IEP participation, status, support and respect) were identified and then broken down into more specific sub-themes: marginality, invisibility, pride in knowledge of students' needs, confusion of roles and responsibilities, feelings of isolation in inclusive classrooms, and ethical concerns, frustrations and future directions. Color coding with pens of various colors and word processing cut and paste techniques were used to organize certain quotes into specific themes and sub-themes. Data were analyzed using constant comparative techniques as well as efforts at conceptual coding of themes (Glaser, 1978).

For purposes of member checks (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), follow-up phone interviews were held to cross-check and confirm some of the emerging themes about the

perceptions on inclusion of ed techs. This was an effort to increase the accuracy of the data interpretation by having multiple viewpoints, rather than just the individual researcher's viewpoint, in effect, it was a type of triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The follow-up interviews complemented the data gathered from individual interviews and expanded the researcher's thinking about various themes.

Findings

The emphasis of this study was on the perceptions of ed techs on inclusion and their roles and responsibilities in inclusive classrooms. What emerged from the data was a great emphasis on their support and training needs, their frustrations and dilemmas, rather than on the actual issues of inclusion. While the researcher attempted to bring the discussion to issues of inclusion, the participants consistently seemed to want to discuss their broad work lives as educational technicians, primarily. Discussions related specifically to inclusion were a secondary priority.

Invisibility and Marginalization

All the participants contributed in various ways to supporting inclusion and helping students with disabilities become integrated into general education classrooms. Sometimes the efforts by ed techs were acknowledged and appreciated and other times they were not:

Dan said:

> We are the invisible elves of the school - we check each morning that the elevator lifts are working; that the PT (physical therapist) will be in for therapy session, and that the lunch will be pureed by the cafeteria ladies. No one knows all we do each day to help kids be included. We make it look easy, but it's hard to remember all this stuff.

Tom discussed some of his duties were assigned to him by the special education teacher , but he was not sure if others in the building knew what he did.

> Six periods out of eight I'm with small groups of students in regular classes. I get twenty minutes for a lunch break. The other two periods I do a lot of things with IEPs, helping to set up notifications to other teachers and I send out notices to

> parents, although I think the guidance counselors are supposed to do that. Last year when I was here I typed up a whole new brochure about IEP goals and objectives for parents. I don't' think that was a regular ed tech job.

Frieda was concerned about tasks she performed that she believed were the responsibilities of the teacher. She stated:

> There are certain tasks that ed techs are not supposed to be doing because it's teacher's work, like teaching the whole class, making-up tests, and modifying the tests. I found myself doing these things this year and it felt like a conflict, so how do I get out of doing it? If I said I'm not supposed to be doing these things, I know I would be out of a job.

These feelings of marginalization and invisibility persisted across all settings, grade levels, and types of students supported. In the past in special education, roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals were more easily defined (Logue, 1992) but inclusion created confusion for ed techs as well as general education teachers. It appeared from this data that special education teachers were so busy organizing services and supports and collaborating with families and administrators, that the work of direct instruction was left to ed techs.

Fair, helpful evaluations

The majority of the participants had never been formally evaluated although all of them stated that they would like to have a written job evaluation done by someone who worked closely with them, either the general education teacher or special education teacher. Ellen described her first experience with evaluation:

> The first time I was evaluated was last year, after five years, and I was blown away. Peter (special education teacher) and Dick (special education teacher) came up with a form and asked all the mainstream teachers that I work with to fill it out and evaluate me. Then Peter will sit down and review all the comments and forms from the teachers with us. Now Peter is encouraging us to set a couple of goals for ourselves for next year - like for me to set up a job board down by the office for the special ed and voc kids.

Meg was not as positive about her first experience with evaluation:

> It's all out of context. It would be like you could come in and observe us and decide about us - it would be out of context. . . I would like to be evaluated by people who have really seen us work with students in inclusion classrooms.

Many participants not only had never been formally evaluated, but many of the ed techs were confused about who was supervising them and who they were reporting to directly, beyond the special education administrator who had hired them. Doug had never been evaluated and was confused about who was his supervisor:

> Some people, like me, are in somebody's classroom much more than the special ed classroom. So that teacher in the classroom is my supervisor, which is kind of confusing because they don't have a special ed background but yet they are with me the most. Sometimes there are conflicts between the special ed teacher and my teacher and then where are we, the ed techs? WE are caught right in the middle - who do we listen to? Usually I see the classroom teacher as the boss, I take directions from her when I can, when the sped teacher isn't in the room.

Confusion about supervision, evaluation, and job expectations existed for all participants in this study. It appeared that clear lines of authority and responsibility had not been developed for them, or, if they had been developed at an administrative level, no one was following the directives at the level of practice.

Challenges of Inclusion

Some of the challenges of inclusion were observed by the ed techs and these challenges related not just to themselves but were related to the challenges of collaboration among teachers, the confusion about learning styles of students, and the sharing of roles and responsibilities. Carol described a concern she for teachers:

> These resource teachers are responsible for stuff that they have never been taught in school. It's like how to run a small business and manage three or four people, us, working in it. They are being asked to be responsible for more and more staff and there is less and less time for that. No communication time is built into my schedule and I see that the resource teacher never gets to work directly with the students, they have to dole out the teaching responsibility to us.

Another challenge is which is the most effective way to use ed techs in the inclusive classroom. Meg stated:

> We don't actually meet with them, there's no time for us to do that. We try to make connections each day with the teachers so that the teacher understands any problems that our students might have, what our role is is very unclear, but we just try to work things out on a day to day basis. Sometimes the teachers aren't sure what we are to do in the classroom - co-teach or just be sure there are no destructive behaviors?

Additional challenges faced by paraprofessionals working in inclusive classrooms were discussed by the participants. These challenges include:

1) Lack of substitutes when ed techs are absent

2) Infrequent invitations to meetings with parents.

3) Lack of training to support students with severe behavioral and physical disabilities.

4) Additional duties when certain teachers are out sick (i.e. bus duty, cafeteria duty, library assistant).

5. Inappropriate requests for suggestions for grades for included students.

6. Frequent requests to grade tests and quizzes for included students.

7. Coverage issues, especially of being left alone in classrooms when general education and special education teachers take time for curriculum planning meetings.

Implications for Practice

There are many limitations to this study for purposes of generalizing to practice. The research was conducted only in one rural state and there were only ten participants, the majority working in secondary schools. While all participants worked the majority of the day supporting students with disabilities in general education classrooms, the structure and rescues of inclusion varied greatly across school districts. Therefore, limited recommendations can be made based on these findings. However, these findings paired with other emerging literature in the field (French, & Pickett, 1997; Giangreco, Edleman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; and Jaskulski & Ebenstien, 1996) can guide us in our thinking and research about inclusion and paraprofessionals.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to help support all members of the school community actively engaged in the inclusion of students with diverse learning needs into the mainstream of the school. However, special emphasis here is on recommendations for paraprofessionals working in inclusive classrooms.

1. Clarify roles and responsibilities. A discussion of roles and responsibilities should occur not only at the administrative level when offered a position, but also at the collaborative level between general education teacher and special education teacher. Paraprofessionals should ask to meet with /talk with those that will be their direct supervisors to better understand the dimension of the position in terms of roles and responsibilities in an inclusive classroom.

2. Request annual written evaluations. It may not be the practice of a particular school district to evaluate paraprofessionals, but this request can be made. Ask to see evaluation forms if any are in use or volunteer forms available from the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals (Pickett, 1995).

3. Be visible and valued. Ask to be part of the school's professional development programs. Discover what courses or experiences are necessary to move to the next level of ed tech status and salary. Offer to attend parent meetings with the responsible teachers and share observations of the students' strengths and weaknesses in inclusive classrooms. Act professionally in dress and demeanor and respect confidentiality.

These recommendations are based on the valuable contributions from the ten participants in this research and are made with the knowledge that suggesting them is much easier than implementing them. Future questions for further research include: what are effective strategies for supervising paraprofessionals in inclusive classrooms; what are successful techniques for elevating the status and visibility of paraprofessionals beyond salary increases; how can paraprofessionals be evaluated appropriately and in a manner that improves performance? As the numbers of paraprofessionals in our schools continue

to increase, answers to these questions must be found if we are to have effective, inclusive schools for the new century. For too long the needs and perceptions of paraprofessionals about their work supporting students with disabilities have been neglected.

Demographics of Educational Technicians in Maine collected by the Maine Department of Education, 1994.

Table 1 Educational Attainment

	Ed Tech I	Ed Tech II	Ed Tech III
High School	970 (57%)	281 (19%)	66 (7%)
1 year college	199 (12%)	86 (6%)	23 (3%)
2 yrs. college	203 (12%)	351 (24%)	78 (9%)
3 yrs. college	72 (4%)	124 (9%)	81 (9%)
B.A./B.S.	166 (10%)	443 (30%)	477 (54%)
B.A./B.S. plus	36 (3%)	113 (8%)	107 (12%)
Master's degree	31 (2%)	56 (4%)	53 (6%)
TOTALS	1677	1454	885

Table 2 Age Groups

	Ed Tech I	Ed Tech II	Ed Tech III	Totals
18-29 years	162 (10%)	250 (18%)	218 (25%)	630 (16%)
30-39 years	614 (37%)	394 (27%)	231 (26%)	1239 (31%)
40-49 years	597 (35%)	569 (39%)	315 (35%)	1481 (37%)
50-59 years	214 (13%)	189 (13%)	98 (11%)	501 (12%)
60 and older	90 (5%)	52 (3%)	23 (3%)	165 (4%)
TOTALS	1677 (42%)	1454 (36%)	885 (22%)	4016

TABLE 3 Participants

Name	*Level*	*Education*	*Years as Ed Tech*	*Grade level*	*Number of Students*	*Hourly wage * benefits*
Betty	I	H.S.	2	9-12	9	$ 6.10
Carol	III	B.S.	2	3-5	11	$10.00 *
Ellen	III	B.S.	5	8-12	2	$ 8.57 *
Daisy	III	M.Ed. in progress	5	K-3	10	$ 9.36 *
Dan	II	H.S.	7	10-12	4	$ 9.00 *
Doug	III	B.S.	1	9-12	7	$ 6.20
Ed	III	A.A.	3	10	1	$ 5.95
Frieda	III	B.S.	2	9-12	10	$ 8.59 *
Meg	III	M. Ed.	1	11-12	10	$ 8.59 *
Tom	III	M.B.A.	1	9-12	6	$ 9.10 *

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